

# Lithuania's Way Out

The Parliament in Vilnius is now debating a momentous issue: whether to suspend its March 11 declaration of independence. By refusing to do so, Lithuanians might well spoil the upcoming summit meeting between Presidents Bush and Gorbachev. But that would not help achieve Lithuania's independence. It would only force Soviet leaders to get tougher and weaken Washington's positive influence.

As a practical matter, Lithuania cannot attain its legitimate national goal unless the West continues to build its new relationship with the Soviet Union. The Lithuanian Parliament now has the opportunity to knit these two dynamics together along the following lines:

The Parliament can vote a moratorium on its declaration of independence — with qualifications. Such an act would meet Moscow's demand, without invalidating Lithuania's right to statehood. Vilnius also would have to carry out its pledge to suspend laws implementing independence, including those forbidding its citizens from serving in "foreign" armies. But in each matter, the operative word would be "suspend," permitting principle to be maintained on both sides.

Moscow will continue to insist that the talks be governed by the Soviet Constitution. But that is a difficult and lengthy process. With suspension voted, the Parliament would have strong grounds for urging the amending of this procedure in the case of a nation forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Meantime, Moscow would have to suspend economic sanctions against Lithuania.

The Parliament also can call on Western nations to insure that the process proceeds without undue delay. Western leaders can use the moment to reaffirm their support for Lithuanian independence and willingness to use their good offices with Moscow.

Mikhail Gorbachev could not easily reject this approach. To do so would brand as insincere his promise to deal fairly with Baltic independence. It would put him in direct conflict with President Mitterrand of France, Chancellor Kohl of West Germany and Prime Minister Thatcher of Britain, who have proposed a similar approach.

None of this will guarantee Lithuanian independence in a year or two. The bargaining will be hard because the issues are hard. They concern the rights of citizens who want continued union with Moscow, and their rights after independence. And they involve precedents for other Soviet republics.

Lithuanian leaders reportedly devised a new offer yesterday to break the deadlock with the Soviet Union. Though the contents of the new offer remain secret, Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene of Lithuania said they touched on the declaration of independence.

Touching on it will not be enough, as many Lithuanian leaders acknowledge privately. To break the Soviet economic knot that is strangling Lithuania and to start negotiations for actual independence, the Lithuanian Parliament will have to show much more flexibility. To suspend the declaration is the shrewdest way to avoid suspending ultimate independence.

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